Richard

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Richard

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"Bandages! We–we can just get some fresh one–"

"No."

"–and–and some... disinfectant or–"

"Not likely."

"–or whatever. Something like that. Can't be that hard to find, right? "

"Wrong."

Richard shook his head. "No, it can't be." He tapped one dirty finger on the useless keyboard, then tried to wipe away the bloody print it left there. His head wagged back and forth absently. "No, it can't be too hard to find some.... stuff. It *can't* be. Whatever we need. I'll make a list an–"

"It is." Grimm blew a sigh out from between clenched teeth. "It really is."

"It's a planet of... of... some–I–don't–know–billion! They have to have *medical supplies.*"

"They do. Just not for us."

"Why the fuck not?"

Grimm shrugged. "It's expensive."

"But–"

"It really is, Rich. Just... just don't worry about it."

"But how can–*shit!*" Richard jerked his hand off of his knee as his mind registered the warm pool spreading over it and the drips starting to tickle his shin. He looked down. The blood was completely soaked into his jeans. "Dammit." *Just made these too...*

"Sorry," said Grimm, his voice muffled against his hand pressed over his mouth.

Richard shook his head, moving his fist, with Grimm's blood now oozing out from between his fingers, over the table. He opened his hand and let go of the bloody rag. Then he wiped his hand on his already-ruined jeans.

"Don't be sorry," he said. "It's okay."

"Really, dude... sor–"

"Shut up, it's not your fault. I'll just make some more. Later." *Really not the most pressing issue now...* He shook his head in frustration. "*Dammit.*"

"Sor–"

"Shut up," Richard said again, and forced his lips to curl into something resembling a smile. "It's not important. We need to get you patched up. Let me just find a place an–"

"No. Really. There's nothing on this planet. Not for us anyway."

Richard shook his head.

He looked at his friend and the knee-to-ankle gash that was still oozing blood. The t-shirt Grimm was now attempting to wrap around the wound was already spotted red, and the bruise under his coarse blond–and–blood–streaked leg hair looked bigger than it had a second ago.

Grimm looked up and met Richard's stare. He abandoned the t-shirt and grabbed the ice pack laying on the table by the bloody rag. Pressed over the wound, the calming blue pack hid the worst of it.

Fucking idiot! The epithets swirling in Richard's head were only

directed at himself. *You need to fix this.* "We'll just... " he started but trailed off. *We'll just what?* "We'll–we'll just have to find another way."

"Don't worry about it–sorry!" Grimm had waved a hand, flicking blood around the room. "Sorry. But don't. I'll be fine."

Richard looked away. It *couldn't* be that hard to get the supplies they needed. Just a few clean bandages and some antiseptic. *Pain killers...* he added silently to the list watching Grimm grit his teeth and clench his fist around the calming blue cold pack, now also streaked red. *Sleep aids maybe...* But just the basics would do. At the very least. There had to be somewhere around here that could get them just the basics. *Any* planet with a population this size had those, or something close.

Finally, Richard just shrugged. "Okay," he said.

Grimm didn't look up.

Richard nodded anyway. "Okay," he said. "I'm going to, um... go get some air. You'll be okay?"

Grimm wasn't paying attention. The ice pack had slid down to the floor, and Grimm was now leaning over his hands that were cupped like a bowl in front of his mouth, his face turning green. His eyes were carefully focused on the table leg, like he was trying to avoid the sight of his own mangled one.

Richard wiped his hands again on his already bloody clothes, made his way through the mess of the crash and stepped out onto the primitive planet.

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To be fair, it wasn't *that* primitive. Richard had seen worse.

He'd made for the nearest blob of lights when the ride'd started to get too rough for comfort. Now, even as he walked through open fields with short, hard stalks stabbing his shoes, the night was not dark. Light bubbled up here and there from lamps on his right that shone on a road and a long wire strung above it. And in the distance the light was denser, brighter. But even without the light bubble of the city, he'd have known they were parked next to civilization. Pieces of plastic dotted the fields; paper rustled between the dried leaves; here and there a rusted something clinked under Richard's shoes.

Litter always marked civilization.

Richard walked – trudged, more like it, plodding along without plan, without strategy, almost randomly – in the general direction of the light for a few minutes. But after a little while, his head cleared from the walk, he paused and squatted down at the corner of the field. He dug around in his pocket and pulled out his guide. The screen lit up in the shadowy field like a beacon and he hurriedly poked it a few times before it dimmed.

Please be close enough...

The networks on this planet were weak, barely reaching over its own surface. He'd heard of stranded travelers before – stuck out in Earth's nowhere, out of the reach of the Home signal and the Earth's networks. The little planet's signal had flickered in and out as they flew in...

But he wasn't *that* lost.

After some more poking and prodding, he had piggybacked onto the Earth's net and set to looking around for something that could help Grimm. He jabbed the keys of the guide in increasing frustration. Page after page flipped by. Link after link after link led him in circles.

It didn't matter.

No one here had what he needed.

No one here had much of anything.

Richard snorted in frustration as he scrolled through pages of stuff he didn't need. Books. Movies. Songs. Games. Fucking *games!* Nothing useful. He was starting to see why Grimm had told him not to bother.

The Earth's networks had been scrubbed.

Richard threw the guide onto the dried field where it glowed dully at him. He rested his head in his hands and took a breath.

So the Earth's networks didn't have what he needed. He'd find it himself.

The impoverished Earth networks still had *some* things that were useful, after all: they had maps. Of everything. And for now, that seemed like the best help Richard could hope for. So he picked up the guide and poked at it a few more times until a map glowed on the screen with a cheery "You are here!"

He studied the mess of streets and buildings for a few minutes, and then he got up and began to walk again in the direction of the city lights.

He didn't have far to go.

As the litter beneath his feet got thicker, civilization got nearer.

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H

Richard glared at the blue sign with the white letter on it. It was the third he'd seen. But a second later his eyes focused on the space about a hundred yards beyond the "H" sign, to another sign, bigger and brighter:

Emergency

Richard jogged towards it. In a minute, he was under the sign. Then a pair of glass doors parted in front of him and he walked into the hospital.

For a spot labeled "Emergency," it was weirdly calm. Long lights lined up on the ceiling cast a cheery glow around paisley couches and a close-cropped carpet. A lady read a magazine. A girl lay on her side, yawning, swinging one foot over the side of the couch. Behind a wide desk, a woman filed her nails. Beside the desk, to its right, some more cheery light spilled out from a hallway.

Richard walked towards the desk.

Then he caught himself.

Earth was an insular planet, not friendly to visitors. Or so Richard had heard.

He stood for a moment, just a few feet away from the desk, one foot hovering in a half-step for a indecisive moment. No one at the desk looked up. Nobody in the waiting room paid him any attention as he stood mutely in the middle of the room. A second later he twisted his course, headed passed the desk and made it to the hallway beyond. He looked over his shoulder.

The desk woman rubbed the edge of one nail against her thumb then went back to filing.

He'd find what he needed himself.

Richard turned his back on them and wandered down the hall.

What now?

His feet kept moving. It was a hospital – it had to have *something*. He kept moving, without a strategy, walking and walking and walking down the glowing hallways, past rooms with doctors, rooms with empty beds, rooms with bored looking nurses and tables and TVs. And he kept walking. There *had* to be something. Something useful...

Finally, finally, he saw it:

Department of Supplies

He'd just turned round a corner, and there it was. He smiled at the sign – giant black letters hanging above a second set of sliding glass doors. He tried not to trip over his own feet as he almost ran towards it.

He smiled and nodded to the two big men standing on either side of the doorway. The doors slid open, and the sound of a hundred printers churning away filled the hallway. Richard jogged gratefully towards the noise.

An arm from one of the big men shot out and barred his way.

"Can I..." Richard gestured to the warehouse-sized space beyond the glass doors.

"What d'you want?" the man with the outstretched arm asked. His voice was very deep.

"I need some bandages," Richard explained, craning his neck to

look into the Department, trying to spot what he needed. "And some antiseptic. My friend got cut up when our sh– um, when–when we... we had a crash. I just need to get him som–"

"License?" The man cut off Richard's babbling.

Richard looked up at him. "What?"

"License?"

"Um." *What?* "Um, I don't have–"

"No license, no supplies."

The other guard, the one who had stood still like a silent rock up until now, reached out and shoved against Richard's left shoulder.

"Out," he growled.

"Wait, I just–"

"Out," the rock-like guard growled again.

The other guard moved to plant himself right in front of the doorway, arms crossed.

"No license, no supplies."

"But I just–"

The rock-like guard grabbed Richard by his upper arms and spun him around to face the hallway, then pushed him hard between the shoulder blades.

"Out."

"But I don't even need–" Richard turned back to the sliding doors.

"Out."

With another shove, the silent guard pushed Richard away from the doors. Richard stumbled backwards. One hand on the wall, he steadied himself, straightened his t-shirt with the other hand and stared open-mouthed at the two men in front of them. They stared impassively back.

So Richard turned away from the guards and the supplies he needed.

"Fine," he said as he walked away, peeking over his shoulder until he was around the corner.

And he was back to wandering randomly through the cheerfully glowing hallways.

It's a hospital. There must be supplies laying around somewhere.

His feet moved over the spotless hallway floors, carrying him around corner after corner. More doctors and nurses sat in boring-looking rooms, sleeping and depressed looking patients lay in beds here and there and one green-shirted man mopped a floor.

There must be something...

And then there was.

At the end of the hall, just sitting there: a rolling cart, and on top of it a high pile of neatly curled bandages in sealed plastic. Underneath were little bottles, some with labels he couldn't understand, some with the labels he'd been hoping for: *antiseptic*.

Richard jogged towards it.

He picked up a bandage from the top of the cart.

"What do you want?"

Richard jumped and dropped the bandage back onto the stack. "What?" He looked around.

A very annoyed-looking face was peaking around the doorway of what looked like an exam room.

Richard pointed at the bandage he'd dropped. "Can I see that?"

"What for?"

"I just want to see it. Can I–"

"You need a bandage, you see a doctor. You need to see a doctor, you wait your turn."

"But–"

"You wait your turn. You don't just go grabbing supplies. Go on, back to the waiting room."

"I'm not *taking* it. I wasn't going to take it." He reached out for the shrink-wrapped package again. "I just need–"

"Put that down! Only a doctor's licensed to give you those. You get on now. Put that down and wait your turn."

"Why can't I just see this one?"

"It's not yours! Get on now, you need me to call security?"

"No, I just–

"Then see yourself out."

"But I just want to look at it."

"This is a hospital, not a playground. Get lost."

Dammit. Richard shook his head but he couldn't really think of anything else to say so he turned around and walked away.

He walked around a few corners, down a few hallways. He tried a few doors. Some were locked, some opened on empty conference rooms. Others opened on rooms full of clipboards and pens and other office supplies.

Finally, he found himself back in the waiting room.

He sank down into one of the paisley couches, rested his elbows on his knees and dropped his head into his hands. The room was quiet except for the buzzing lights and the flipping magazine pages of the woman on the other couch, and a pencil scratching on paper behind the desk. No one spoke.

There was nothing else to do here.

So Richard got up. He walked to the glass doors which slid open for him. Then he walked under the bright *Emergency* sign and away from the hospital. When he got on the curb at the edge of the hospital's driveway, he sat down, the *Emergency* sign still blinking behind him. He took out his guide again and punched furiously at the screen.

More maps.

Why, *why* didn't Earth have anything more useful!

His hands shook, he was starting to worry about the mess back at the ship - particularly whether Grimm's cut had opened up again or what microbes might have moved in.

Still, maps looked like the most useful thing he could find, so Richard bent over the guide, squinting at the little lines. After a few minutes, he put the Guide back in his pocket, pushed himself up off the curb, turned north and walked down the street.

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A bell tinkled over the door.

Richard stepped in to the shop and let the door clang shut behind him. He smiled at the rows and rows of medicine and bandages and hair products and snack foods that filled the 24-hour pharmacy.

Taking a few cautious steps into the store, he looked around. A grey-haired and tired-looking pharmacist stood behind a desk in one corner shuffling papers. He did not look up, so Richard moved further in. It only took a few seconds to find the aisle he needed. Bandages and antiseptic filled racks next to cough syrup and laxatives and pills for erectile dysfunction. At the end of the aisle was shampoo. Backing up a few paces, Richard looked over his shoulder and back to the door. He twisted his head, looking up and down the row. It was still empty. He tip-toed back to the supplies he needed and gently, quietly slid a shrink-wrapped package of bandages off the rack.

He dug around in his pockets for a minute and pulled out an unimpressive-looking, thumb-sized hunk of black plastic. The thumb of his left hand pressed down on it and a little light came on. His right hand held up the shrink-wrapped package and another light blinked on, illuminating a tiny screen.

Richard glanced nervously over his shoulder. He tapped his foot anxiously and glanced back at the screen.

.....10% .....40% 75%

"What the HELL are you doing?"

Richard jumped and the package and pocket scanner clattered to the floor. He squatted and scooped the scanner up.

"What the HELL are you doing?" The pharmacist pushed a pair of wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose under a messy mop of graying hair and glared through them. "WHAT are you–"

"I'm just–"

"Put that down!"

Richard dropped the bandage he'd been about to pick up. "Look, I just need to–"

"You can't have that!"

"My friend is hurt. I *need* these plans."

"That's not yours! You can't just *take* –"

"I wasn't going to!" Richard yelled back. He pushed himself up off the floor. He was taller than the graying pharmacist, and he glared down at him. Fatigue and frustration and the thought of Grimm bleeding back at the ship was finally boiling over. "I wasn't going to *take* it. I just need the plans, so I can make the stuff back at the ship." He ran an agitated hand through his hair and shook his head, totally, totally at a loss. "I just need the plans."

"Those aren't yours–"

"I *know* that, but–"

"You can't just take those!" the pharmacist sputtered and glanced over his shoulder towards the door of the shop.

Richard was still shaking his head. "I just need to scan it."

"Well you can't."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't belong to you, kid. You want something here you buy it."

"But I don't need it. *I. Just. Need. A. Copy. Of. The. Plans.* " Richard explained slowly, emphatically, stopping at each word, so the man would finally, finally understand and let him get back to Grimm. "I just need the plans..."

"Can't sell you those."

"WHY–" Richard stopped himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, his fingers pressed into his forehead as if they could still his thoughts. He looked back at the pharmacist and tried again, softer. "Why *not*?"

"Do I look like I sell that kind of thing? I don't sell plans. I sell bandages." He looked over his shoulder again, then back at Richard. "I can sell you a bandage."

"I don't have any money." *Not from this planet anyway.* He grit his teeth and silently cursed himself yet again for being so unprepared.

"Then you don't get anything. You want something, you buy it," said the pharmacists again. "You want me to go out of business?" He squinted up at Richard and pushed the glasses up again. He tilted his head to the side and crossed his arms.

They glared at each other in silence.

Finally, Richard took a step back and looked away from the pharmacist. He sighed and shook his head.

"Look, I really need help. My friend got cut up in a crash. I just need some bandages to wrap it up properly, and some antiseptic to make sure it doesn't get infected. I can make the supplies myself, I just need the plans for them."

"Then you get some money, say..." the pharmacist stooped and picked up the package from the floor and squinted at it for a minute. "say, five hundred dollars for this one, maybe. Maybe more. You get some money and you get yourself a license."

Richard blinked. "Five hundred dollars? It's a bandage."

"Well you don't want the bandage. You want the plans to make your own. You need a license that lets you do that. The bandage is five dollars. The license is five hundred. Or more. I don't know – you have to go to the company that made it."

"What?"

"You want the plans and that's more," the pharmacist said like that explained it. "You don't want a bandage, see? You want to *make* bandages. See?"

"No."

"You could make five hundred bandages with those." He jabbed a finger at the scanner in Richard's hand. "Or five thousand. That's why it's more. Make sense?"

"No."

The pharmacist looked over his shoulder again. He shook his head. Then one hand jammed the bandage's package back on the rack so fiercely that three other packages clattered to the floor. The pharmacist bent and picked them up, muttering.

"Kids. You want things for free. Like you've got some sort of righ–"

The bells over the door tinkled and clanged again.

The pharmacist stopped muttering, straightened up and turned to face the newcomers. Richard looked over the older man's shoulder. He tried to smile at the two dark-blue-suited men coming down the aisle, but the badges on their dark blue shirts were familiar. He had come to

Earth unprepared, but not ignorant. His stomach clenched and his hands shook as his eyes moved over the shields pinned on the men's chests.

The pharmacist smiled. "Hello officers."

The officers smiled back. One stuck out his hand and the pharmacist shook it. The other eyed Richard, his gaze glancing off the bloody knee of his jeans then resting on the tiny scanner in his hand. Richard's hand moved instinctively towards his pocket.

The officer grabbed the scanner.

"Hey!" Richard reached for it.

The officer's arm butted against his chest and for the second time that night he almost fell to the floor. The officer caught him, closing his arm in a vice-like grip.

"Thank you," said the first officer to the pharmacist.

"Thank you for coming."

"Yep, this is the one" said the second officer still looking at Richard, one hand still clasped firmly on his arm. "This is the one's been causing a bit of trouble around town tonight."

"*Arrgg!*" Richard let out a frustrated growl. "I just need a *fucking banda–*"

"You may want to keep quiet," the officer cut him off. "Until we get down to the station."

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Maybe they have bandages in jail.

Richard's jaw clenched so hard it was getting sore, but the bite of the handcuffs reminded him to shut up. He tried to relax his wrists, but they still pulled reflexively against the biting metal.

He was sweating. The cool night was slowly lightening into dawn, but it wasn't warming the chill inside the police car and Richard shivered under a drip of sweat sliding down his temple.

The car stopped. The door opened.

"Thank you," said Richard as he fumbled from the car.

They had pulled up to a little box of an office set in a wide parking lot flooded with white light that made a little bubble in the night. Matching cars sat in a row beside the front door.

A hand clamped down on his upper arm and then he was walking – or being walked – through the front door into the office.

More blue uniforms walked around inside. A few others lounged in hard chairs. One dozed, snoring lightly, head lolling back. One or two looked up from papers or coffee or phones when Richard and the two officers entered, gave them passing glances then looked back to their papers or coffees or phones.

The hand holding Richard's arm herded him past the desks and into a smaller room at the back of the station.

"Sit."

The hand on his arm pushed him sideways. His legs hit a metal chair beside a wide and dingy desk. He fell into the chair, the hand on his arm jerking him into a sitting position before he could fall to the ground.

The hand unclamped from his arm, and the officer who'd been herding him sat down across from Richard.

"We've been having complaints all night about you," he started, his voice slow, measured, his eyes squinting at Richard. "Couple calls from the hospital, then the pharmacy."

"I was just trying to get some supplies for my friend," Richard explained without hope. "And I don't have any money and–"

"So you decided to steal them?"

"What? No! Steal..." He shook his head, utterly, utterly confused. "No. *Steal?*"

"That's what Medz is saying."

"Who?"

"Medz." The officer raised a eyebrow. "The makers of the supplies you were stealing."

"I *wasn't*–"

"We've been on the lookout for you folks. Medz wants to press charges. You'll be lucky if they only push for a fine." He shook his head. "Worse than theft if you ask me."

"I *didn't*–"

"But some good people are finally reporting you folks. We got a report at the hospital. And the pharmacy. They're sick of you all freeloading."

"'You all'?"

"You never turn on the fucking news do you?" The officer snorted. He shook his head. "*Fucking kids*" he muttered under his breath. "Think

you can get away with it. Not anymore."

"I just needed a bandage! And some medicine."

The officer leaned back in his chair and smiled. "Uh huh." He pulled a notepad out of his pocket and started to scribble on it. "And what were you going to do with it once you stole it?"

"I didn't–*you're not listening to me!*" Richard dropped his head into his hands and spoke through a clenched jaw. "I was going to make some supplies for my friend."

The officer's smile widened as he scribbled some more on the notepad. "So you were going to distribute?"

"To my friend." Richard looked up. "Wait–what do you mean *distribute*? I just need some stuff for my friend, I wasn't–"

"You were planning on–"

The door opened.

It was the other officer who'd come to the pharmacy. He gestured to his partner who got up and flipped the notepad shut. A moment later the door slammed behind both of them.

Richard rested his head in his still-cuffed-together hands.

He waited.

The door opened again.

The officer who'd interrogated him was back. "Up," he said.

Richard stood.

The officer grabbed his arm again and herded him back to the bigger room with all the desks. He shoved Richard into a hard plastic seat.

"Wait here."

Then he moved behind a nearby desk, sat down, yawned, and began to shuffle through a layer of papers.

And Richard waited.

And waited.

A hand on the clock over his head desk ticked loudly every minute. Pens skidded over papers and papers shuffled over dingy desks. A few times the door squeaked open and slammed shut. Richard just kept his eyes on the clock.

And he waited.

And waited.

The door slammed.

Richard looked over. A guy with faded pink hair and ripped jeans standing by the door looked back. He looked vaguely familiar. He casually reached into his pockets and pulled out what looked like one of Earth's phone, but there was something more familiar about it...

The guide!

Richard stared at the pink-haired guy with the alien technology. The pink-haired guy looked back and smiled faintly. Then he walked over to the nearest desk and talked softly to the officer who had arrested Richard.

"...settlement... no... they should have called... okay... yeah, yeah..."

The officer got up, grabbed Richard's arm once more, pulled him to his feet and unlocked the cuffs.

"Go." He shoved Richard towards the door.

"What?"

"Supplier's not pressing charges. Get outta here."

"Um..."

"Out!" The officer glared.

"C'mon," the pink haired guy said. "It's okay." He held the door open.

Richard walked through it, away from the officer now shaking his head and muttering under his breath.

"*Thief*."

Then the door slammed, and they were out of the police station. The quiet light of dawn was spread over the parking lot, but it didn't do anything to cheer Richard, who shivered in the cool morning air.

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On the edge of the parking lot, the pink-haired guy stopped. He sat down on the curb. One hand absently played with the tatters at the bottom of one jean leg.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes." Richard plopped down next to him on the cold curb. "How'd you do that?"

"I paid the... fine."

"What?"

"Paid the fine. I called the suppliers. Medz – they're the ones who've got the cops chasing everyone down. They won't press charges if you pay up for the damages plus fines."

"What damages?"

The pink haired guy shrugged. "I..." He snorted and flicked his hands up for a minute in a helpless gesture then went back to playing with the frayed edges of the jeans. He shook his head. "I don't know."

Richard nodded. "How much?"

"Five thousand."

He gaped. "Five *thousand?* I don't have–"

"It's ok. I traded for credit before I got here." He looked up at Richard with a sympathetic half-smile. "Why? Didn't you?"

"Um... no," *Idiot.* He cursed himself again, thinking of his ill-thought out joy ride. "We didn't um, plan too well."

The pink haired guy smiled. "It's okay. No one ever does."

"But..." Richard shook his head. "Five *thousand*? Why?" The incomprehensible number circled around in his head, and fatigue made it even harder to even begin to understand. "Five *thousand*?"

Again, the guy shrugged. "It's how it is."

"But they told me the license or whatever was five hundred. The- the guy at the pharmacy..." he trailed off, rubbing his head – it was starting to ache.

"Yeah, but if you try to take it, if you try to take it and share it – they want more."

Richard shook his head. It didn't make any sense and he was too tired and worried to try to make sense out of it. "How did you know?" he asked.

"Word travels." He didn't elaborate.

Richard didn't know what to say so he stared at the pavement. Eventually, he would have to go back to the ship empty handed and hope Grimm was still holding on.

"So what happened?" the pink-haired guy asked.

"We had a little... uh, accident - it's not important - I don't know... My friend got a bit cut up in the landing. We need supplies. More bandages mostly. Some other stuff..." he shook his head hopelessly.

"And you don't have the plans for them?"

"Yeah... we didn't really come prepared," Richard admitted.

The pink haired guy smiled. Richard could see the understanding in his face. Travelers this far out rarely came prepared.

"Can't you just download them?"

"There's nothing on Earth's networks. And I can't get a signal from anywhere else. Not in this part of the galaxy. Can you?"

"Huh. No. I mean, I'm not connected anymore. Not to anything

off-Earth."

Damn you back-to-nature types. Richard tried to relax the grimace off his face. He just managed a polite, "Uh huh."

"Here, I can get you something."

"I thought you said–"

"I'm not connected back home. I can still get on the Earth's net."

Richard shook his head. "But it's been scrubbed - there's nothing useful."

"Only on the public sites.... we might still find..." the guy scrolled through his alien device "...something useful... there."

"What?"

"Got it." He stuck a familiar looking piece of plastic into the guide.

"Got wha–"

"Medical kit." A second later he was handing Richard the little piece of plastic. "Wait, you have power to print this?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Power's hard to get on this planet."

Richard barely heard him. He clutched the storage device in one fist. In his other hand the guide already shone with a map, a friendly "You Are Here", and a path back to the ship. He looked up at the pink haired guy.

"Thank–"

"Go on." The guy smiled.

"Thank you!"

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Richard ran.

He ran back through the city streets, back past the H signs, back through the outskirts of civilization, back through the dark fields past the road and power line strung above it and the lamps, now dark in the morning light. A stalk stabbed his foot and his ankle twisted over, but he kept running.

Finally, finally he was back at the ship.

He ripped the door open and nearly fell over Grimm in the hallway.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Hey." Richard righted himself and fumbled over to the ship's computer, slowly charging in the corner.

"Hey yourself," Grimm answered. "Where'd you go?"

"Um, out to get stuff." He jammed the memory stick into the computer and poked frantically at the screen.

Finally, Richard stepped back from the computer, sank into a chair, took a breath and took a look at his friend. The now-crusty blood drips on his leg hair were mixed with drips of pus.

Infected.

Grimm laughed. "Looks good, huh?"

Richard tried to make his face look less shocked. "It looks... fine." He grit his teeth and turned back to the ship's computer.

The printer next to the computer was starting to make soft whirring sounds. Something clunked. The thing vibrated ever so slightly. A moment later, a thick, white strip of gauze started to wend its way out of the printer onto the waiting tray, neatly coiling on itself. It was followed by a tiny plastic bottle, then drops of antiseptic.

"The pain killers'll be out soon. And..." he looked back at the screen and over the list of things in the med kit. "And then something to help you sleep." *And then I can finally make some new fucking pants!*

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